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## XV. HOW POETIC IS SHELLEY'S POETRY?

### (A CENTENARY VIEW)

Poor Shelley's after-fame is now almost as fluctuant as that scene of his ending, just a hundred years ago, when the waves bore him "darkly, fearfully, afar" (July 8, 1822). The centenary of his death finds his status as a poet involved in peculiar uncertainty. Writers who have agreed fairly well on other matters have differed widely in their evaluations of Shelley's style, particularly as compared with the styles of Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats. And almost any company of *immediate* poetry-lovers—I mean, those who maintain a healthy distrust of professional critics and a warm faith in their own predilections—can wax uncommonly disputatious if one of their number affirms that Shelley was a very real poet, or a very unreal one. Apparently his art is quite singular in its capacity to captivate and to repel. It so repelled Matthew Arnold that it appeared to him a maze which wise men should rather walk around than penetrate. Though he surveyed it tellingly, he never passed right through it with his hand on an unbroken clue; nor have his followers done so. Critics of another type have yielded themselves so fully to the poet's fascinating meanders that eventually they could not emerge, with undimmed vision, into the open country beyond. In short, it has proved very difficult to bring the captivating and the repellent qualities of Shelley's work under a single impartial scrutiny. But at least it should be clear that such a scrutiny should now confine itself to Shelley's poems, submerging all other sources of impression. Extensive enquiry into the poet's life, theories, and affiliations was called for by the singular nature of his case. But this enquiry has become entangled, rather obscurely, with the question which in the end must stand alone: How poetic is Shelley's poetry?

## I

That question may be faced most squarely, perhaps, in connection with *Adonais*, which, while thoroughly representative of Shelley, has proved itself more generally satisfying to his readers than any other of his major poems. Certainly, in its own way, *Adonais* may be regarded as the most fascinating treatment in English poetry of an old human subject: regret for the transitory and high yearning for the changeless—these two feelings companioning and enhancing each other, like variants of a single theme, until the “immortal longing” can burn intensely, in a culminating moment, though the very air of death. The rhythm, almost unexampled in its combination of prevailing dignity with fluent shiftings of tone, carries the duple theme magically and culminates with it in the closing passage (stanzas 54, 55):

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
That Beauty in which all things work and move,  
That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse  
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
Which through the web of being blindly wove  
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of  
The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me,  
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!  
I am borne darkly, fearfully afar;  
Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of heaven,  
The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

At once a rhythmic and a thematic triumph is that “Light” which kindles wistfully in the opening verse, and passes changefully through the ensuing lines like a leaping and subsiding torch-flame borne by a swift messenger, and beacons steadily for a moment at the close, as though from the

goal. The passage can be fascinating, if we are in the mood for it. But at another time, when we regard it with a certain degree of poetic intentness, it may easily become repellent, driving us back on our memory of lines that render an "immortal longing" in a more satisfying manner, such as Cleopatra's

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have  
Immortal longings in me; now no more  
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip - - -

To be sure, the whole speech of nineteen lines, if lifted from its context in Shakespeare's play and placed alongside the Shelley passage, takes on some air of cheapness. Its half dozen superb verses are surrounded and tinged with the common soil of Elizabethan rhetoric. Shelley's rhetoric and rhythm are more evenly distinguished, and his subject is more aspiring. Nevertheless, when our aim is sheer poetic pleasure, the Shakespeare passage is the more satisfying of the two. For its author, unlike Shelley, is intent in a very high degree upon the specific kind of emotion he is rendering: namely the "immortal longing" of a passionate and egotistic nature now weary of the world, and eager to project its love and earthly splendor, painlessly, into eternity. The passage is remarkable for its variety of emotional tones, swiftly succeeding each other, yet dominated by a single homogeneous quality. Shelley, on the other hand, twines together two quite different qualities of emotion, in such a way as to frustrate both. His stanzas yearn upward toward a Light that is absolutely beneficent, "beyond the clouds of cold mortality," and "like a star" in its eternal and awful peace. But this thread of high "immortal longing" is woven confusedly into a warp of restless mortal sympathies. The poet feels for the earthy "web of being" in which we are all enmeshed, the blind, warm life that pulses through "man and beast and earth and air and sea"; and thereupon, somewhat diverging from that gregarious emotion, comes a rush of sympathy for his own unconventional spirit, far from the routine existence of "the trembling throng." In short,

the mixed emotion of the passage is so restless that it fails of elevation, and so anxious for elevation that it is thin and warped in its human implications.

Just previously (stanza 52) Shelley had been able to touch the same two spheres of feeling in swift alternation and yet without confusion:

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity - - - -

Here it seems that the poet has contemplated his "immortal longing" so intently that it can become, for a sufficient moment, a white and quiet light of emotion inundating all else. The "white radiance of eternity" is felt distinctively—so is this "many-colored" life of ours which dims and entirely stains that radiance, and yet transfuses it, in transitory domed splendor. Why then, in the sequel, does the poet collapse that dome and reduce that radiance to a kaleidoscopic figuration which mingles the white and colored lights factitiously? His palpable aim in the two final stanzas is to draw together, in one pattern, several topics which he has treated scatteringly in the course of the poem. But beneath that design is a deeper one. Consciously or not, he wishes to close the poem on his favorite note of high aspiration interwoven, indistinguishably, with wide sympathy.

Here, indeed, is the central purport of Shelley's work as a whole, from *Queen Mab* to *Hellas*. He wished to express an unhampered sympathy with the wide "web of being" in men and Nature; and, at the same time, a pure devotion to "the Good," or whatever one may choose to term the highest life of the spirit. He had an exceptionally keen sense for the old human longing to combine such sympathy with such devotion, "harmonizing this earth with what we feel above." But he had an abnormally slight sense for the real divergency, and the continual opposition, of these two emotions in the general human heart. It is a matter of common experience, in individual lives and in history, that a heighten-

ing of our sentiment for "the Good" will narrow our sympathy with those features of life that seem most remote from it; and that a broadening of our sympathies, in an effort at readjustment, will pull down considerably our love of "the Good." But this competition scarcely appears in Shelley's work. So that, instead of striving as the human heart strives when it is most vital, toward a real harmony in which each of those two emotions should retain its own distinctive quality, Shelley quickly merged and denatured them. Hence the extraordinary sense of frustration which we experience when we try to read, with poetic intentness, his most ambitious work, *Prometheus Unbound*. The poem appeals at once to our yearning for universal sympathy and to our yearning for human perfection. These two sentiments, when stimulated, tend to diverge and to develop themselves in competition with each other. But Shelley will not have them do so. From the first, he keeps winding and fusing them together in a single stream of undifferentiated emotion. For example, he merges more and more the qualities of the two principal personages, Prometheus and Asia. If these two characters had been made the vehicles, respectively, of ethical elevation and wide sympathy, their eventual reunion could have won a fine human and artistic significance, suggesting that fullness of life which the human spirit recognizes as its greatest potentiality. But in the course of the story, the initial nobility of Prometheus is soon softened down by his rising pity for all things, including the powers of evil (Act I, scene i, lines 53, 305, 480); and finally this active striver for mankind becomes a retired well-wisher, throbbing only with millennial reverie and sympathy (Act III, scene iii). On the other hand, the Aphroditic quality of Asia, her imaging of the universal pulsing desire that weaves the "web of being," remains inchoate; for the poet wishes her to adumbrate also the higher kind of love that urges human perfection. Thus the outlines of Prometheus and his Asia fade into each other: the two are not married, but merged. The poem as a

whole frustrates and repels our poetic sense by attempting the music of the spheres on a single string.

Since Shelley's longing for human harmony means a denaturalization of the emotions which must take part in such harmony, it is essentially unpoetic. It has rhetorical zest and rhythmic sweep, but it lacks *poetic* spontaneity. Whatever spontaneity may mean in personal life, surely in verse it means that, for the moment, all the artist's powers are intensely preoccupied in bringing out the full specific quality of his emotion, and in thus making it poetically real. But Shelley, as in the two final stanzas of *Adonais*, is intent on shaping up his theme, not on shaping out his emotion. The pattern achieved in that passage, as previously suggested, is rhetorical and rhythmic, rather than poetic. It does not consist in a poetic realization of the writer's emotions. Such unreality pervades Shelley's more ambitious works, becoming acute in climactic passages. Its source, in the last analysis, is his peculiar longing for harmony—in other words, the kind of love, aspiration, and hope that run centrally through his poetry. These emotions failed to grow more specific and shapely, as Shelley's powers in verse became more mature, for the simple reason that his interest in them was not mainly an artistic interest. He did not experience them with any depth of poetic originality and spontaneity. Accordingly, those who have found in Shelley's work an extraordinary and predominant spontaneity have had their eye (and often unwittingly) upon his temperament rather than upon his art. Those who have condemned his poetry for *mere* spontaneity have left the gate open to those who have praised it for *sheer* spontaneity.<sup>1</sup> Neither phrase is properly applicable to Shelley's main territory. But in one field of poetry—a field very limited in its human value, but very keen in its human appeal—Shelley could be intensely spontaneous.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Elmer More's essay on Shelley deals most penetratingly with the confused nature of Shelleyan criticism, and the actual nature of the Shelleyan temperament. But his treatment of the subject of spontaneity

## II

Through the false harmonies of Shelley runs a vital and captivating melody. It is the cry of "the spirit of solitude": the most exquisite note of utter loneliness in English poetry. His solitude is that of a spirit hovering between rich human sympathy and high self-satisfaction, not realizing either. Loneliness of this sort has been notably common during the past hundred and fifty years; but it hovers perpetually in the outskirts of human life. It is a mood that awaits any one whenever his dissatisfaction with human institutions and conventions begins to veil from him their deepest meaning. Through convention, in the finest sense of that nowadays degraded word, human sympathy and aspiration are at once restricted and, in some degree, made real. But Shelley would see only the deadening tendency of convention, and could therefore have no real fellowship with the deep con-

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in Shelley's poetry seems inadequate. In reference to Francis Thompson's remark upon the closing scenes of *Prometheus Unbound*—"the spell on which depends such necromantic castles is some spirit of pain charm-poisoned at their base"—Mr. More says: "That charm-poisoned spirit was nothing less than the peculiar romantic illusion of the Revolution which ignored the native impulse of evil, ever lurking in the heart of man, ready to leap forth when its chains are shaken, and which valued the emotions in accordance with their mere spontaneity and intensity" (*Shelburne Essays*, Seventh Series, p. 18). But surely "the native impulse of evil" is itself among the emotions which are spontaneous and intense. Therefore Shelley's failure to give a proper value to that impulse means that his criterion was not "mere spontaneity and intensity," and suggests that this phrase is not an exact key to his poetic art. The whole question would seem to turn on a proper distinction of the artistic mode from the moral mode of controlling emotion. Though these two modes are complementary, a too close approximation of them will produce confusion in the criticism of poetry. Certainly, the man Shelley was deficient enough in self-control, and often followed the impulse of the moment: this may be called "mere spontaneity." But it is equally true that he was deficient in the artistic instinct of following an emotion *through*, into its full specific nature: this means that he lacked poetic spontaneity. He was animated by a quick, vague affectionateness. He never followed its lower motions into the sphere of vivid lust, nor its higher motions into the sphere of firm love, either in his life or in his poetry.



vention-making power in our nature which imperfectly builds, and rebuilds, the house of life. That living structure, even while his nature craved its shelter and could find nothing beyond it but shadowy hopes and fears, could appear to him an idle painted veil:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live  
 Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there,  
 And it but mimic all we would believe  
 With colors idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear  
 And Hope, twin Destinies, who ever weave  
 Their shadows o'er the chasm sightless and drear.  
 I knew one who had lifted it—he sought,  
 For his lost heart was tender, things to love - - - -

Most poets, when their love is thus inadequate to the constructive life of mankind, can float their homeless imagination for a while on the beating tides of common desire—from which Shelley shrank. A few can build up, through meditation, a higher companionship—for which Shelley was too wilful. At once exceptionally refined and extraordinarily restless, he found neither the relief of full desire nor the steadiness of calm thought:

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,  
 Nor peace within nor calm around,  
 Nor that content surpassing wealth  
 The sage in meditation found,  
 And walked with inward glory crowned—  
 Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure—

But he found the very cadence of utter solitude.

Shelley's verse is at its best when he best realizes, poetically, his loneliness. His dominant mood is then trance-like, for it is made of emotion which is withdrawing itself from the sources of emotion. It is a thin but real love of life, circling above an abyss of nothingness: thrilling upward, again and again, in an ecstasy poignant with a sense of its own coming dissolution; but sinking down, with increasing frequency, in a state of despairing apathy. He achieved a fine art in the representation of apathy. Often it comes out

in dramatic touches, imaging either his own state of lonely suspension, as in the fragment "To the Moon," which breaks off so suggestively:

Art thou pale for weariness  
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,  
Wandering companionless  
Among the stars that have a different birth,—  
And ever changing, like a joyless eye  
That finds no object worth its constancy?  
Thou chosen sister of the spirit,  
That gazes on thee till it pities—

or the kind of apathy, opposite in origin and complementary to his own, which descends upon mechanically conventional persons, such as the dead Ginevra's husband:

Some few yet stood around Gherardi there,  
Friends and relations of the dead,—and he,  
A loveless man, accepted torpidly  
The consolation that he wanted not;  
Awe in the place of grief within him wrought.

But this vein is richest, of course, in Shelley's lyric and sensuous stanzas. They range in tone all the way from the deathly languor of this passage in *The Invocation to Misery*:

There out tent shall be the willow,  
And mine arm shall be thy pillow;  
Sounds and odors, sorrowful  
Because they once were sweet, shall lull  
Us to slumber, deep and dull;

to the piercing desolation of *When the Lamp is Shattered*. The whole movement of this wonderful little piece is that of a love swaying down, so to speak, toward insensibility. In other poems, such as *To A Skylark*, the same love spirals upward, in swift, ecstatic joyance: creating for a moment, in its longing to escape languor, a region where "languor cannot be." Shelley's delight and apathy must be felt, by a reader who would touch the finest pulse of his verse, as diastole and systole, as the lift and fall of a single wave of

emotion. His joy is unique in English poetry because it is uniquely near to apathy:

The passing wind which heals the brow at noon,  
And may strike cold into the breast at night,  
Yet cannot linger where it soothes the most,  
Or long soothe could it linger—(Fragment of an unfinished  
drama)

Other poets have deeper sorrow and richer joy than his. No other has his exquisite hovering movement of delight: his lonely joy, swaying cloudlike between heaven and earth, always about to dissolve and pass.

From its very nature, Shelley's lonely emotion could rarely assume real poetic shape: I mean, that inner form, synonymous with poetic reality, which is created by the union of sincere impulse and focal theme. Such union is not consummated in the bulk of Shelley's work. Sometimes, as in *The Witch of Atlas*, he follows his shifting moods, veraciously, through a thin and diffusive theme. At other times, as in *Epipsychidion*, he pursues a focal idea—a deliberately thought-up topic, more or less derived from his reading—which his own actual emotion cannot properly fulfil. For when vitally ingenuous his poetic spirit is so liable to formless volutions that, when deliberately architected, it is always likely to become factitious and inane, like the human shapes which a fanciful, determined eye finds in the clouds. But a real shape of poetry, now and then suddenly emerging in these cloudy regions, has a magic beauty, an "inevitability," quite singular in English verse. We feel that an "unbodied joy" has found for a moment, as if by chance and after long vain journeyings, the only theme in which it could really be clothed. Such a theme was the autumnal west wind which Shelley listened to in a forest near Florence. The Ode which ensued is an harmonious texture of fancies which had been drifting scatteredly through his previous works, and which were now drawn into a single rhythm under the sweep of a movement in Nature wonderfully correspondent to the tenor of his own lonely mood. "Make

me thy lyre even as the forest is," he prays: and never was poetic invocation more magically answered. Wraith-like fancy, tumultuous yearning, and delighted brooding—spectral leaf, surging cloud, and quivering wave—all flow into one "deep autumnal tone, sweet though in sadness." The poem is a sudden apparition, in lovely form, of the spirit of utter solitude.

The continual though obscured presence of this spirit can lure us on, by hints and gleams of itself, through the inanities of Shelley's more ambitious works. We feel that at any moment the true daemon may take shape, and sing; as in the rich sylvan solitude of Act II, scene ii, of *Prometheus Unbound*,

When there is heard through the dim air  
The rush of wings, and rising there,  
Like many a lake-surrounded flute,  
Sounds overflow the listener's brain  
So sweet, that joy is almost pain.

In *Adonais*, more than elsewhere, this music of isolation is sustained through a highly architected theme. An instinct finely true to himself, though untrue to Keats, led Shelley to place in the forefront of the poem an image of Adonais in a "twilight chamber," gone from life, but not yet covered with the darkness of decay: lying there in "deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill"; closely attended still by his own fading aspirations, surrounded in the near distance by the shifting vital powers of Nature, visited by the eternal spirit of poetry herself—but insensible, now, to them all (stanzas 7, 8). This is the noblest form of that picture of entranced loneliness which, first appearing in the opening stanzas of "Queen Mab," is painted and repainted throughout Shelley's work,—in hues more deathful toward the close. Something of nobility is sacrificed, but the suggestiveness of the picture is heightened, by the "one frail Form" who is featured so vividly among the poetic mourners of Adonais (stanzas 31-34). Properly considered, this figure is a pathetic variant of the central Adonais-image. It represents

the Shelleyan temperament not yet absolved from life, but on the verge of dissolution: "a pard-like Spirit beautiful and swift," hunted to the end by its own lonely aspirations:

A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
Whose thunder is its knell. - - -

The episode prepares the way for an increased emphasis upon the poet's yearning to be free from life, and to become "what Adonais is." It is a yearning which shrinks away from earthly personality, from "the world's bitter wind," and from the processes of natural decay; but falls short of a real devotion to that immortality which is at once the most organic and the most peaceful life of the human spirit. Essentially, it is a yearning for a sort of perpetual trance, as of a being suspended between time and eternity, oblivious of its utter solitude.

This longing is the most vitally felt emotion in the last third of "Adonais." But the poet's inner shaping of it is confused and imperfect: so that this part of the work, though the most popular, is substantially the least adequate, from the standpoint of art. Shelley endeavors, as previously suggested, to focus his theme upon the idea of a Light, or Power, which solves all discords,

Which wields the world with never-weary'd love,  
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

These verses are inept and mediocre, not because entirely void of human truth, but because Shelley has not intently experienced the two-sided truth they hint at. Their neat rhetorical harmony is in strong contrast with the real melody that flows whenever the poet contemplates, with intent longing, the Adonais-image; which, at the beginning of this part of the poem (stanzas 38-40), is rapt away from its initial "twilight chamber," and established in an ideal state beyond decay:

He has outsoared the shadow of our night :  
Envy and calumny and hate and pain,

And that unrest which men miscall delight,  
Can touch him not and torture not again - - -

Such music belongs to the spirit of solitude, in its yearning for Lethe. Its echoes can carry us through all ensuing inanities, even through the rhetoric of the two closing stanzas, quoted previously. Behind their elaborate and tangled imagery: behind the poet's desire to have his "spirit's bark" driven by the breath of eternity, far over a tempestuous sea, beyond the riven "massy earth" and "sphered skies," toward the "inmost veil of heaven"—behind all this rhetorical pomp of ocean and air, we can hear, if we will, that clear small voice of poetry which speaks most perfectly, perhaps, in the lonely, mysterious murmuring of the following stanzas from another poem, where sea and sky are quieter:

Yet now despair itself is mild,  
Even as the winds and waters are;  
I could lie down like a tired child,  
And weep away the life of care  
Which I have borne and yet must bear,  
Till death like sleep might steal on me,  
And I might feel in the warm air  
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea  
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

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